

Original Paper

Spanish Heritage Language Learners: A Review of Literature Analyzing Their Preference of the English Language

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Abstract

The increased number of Spanish Heritage Language (SHL) speakers in American schools has called for the need of new research focused on SHL students, their parents, their teachers, and a profound analysis of best instructional practices for this individualized group of students. The purpose of this thorough analysis of peer-reviewed literature is to evaluate language programs for the growing SHL student population in elementary schools. A careful look into this growing population will help evaluate the educational programs provided to SHL students such as the Dual Language (DL) immersion program and the Transitional Bilingual Education program (TBE). This review addresses why students walk into an elementary classroom as an SHL and English language bilingual and subsequently become monolinguals as they progress in their elementary school years. Recognizing the factors that lead to a student's language preference can assist parents, teachers, and the education system in developing an academic structure that will promote bilingualism and biliteracy for SHL learners.

Keywords

bilingual, dual language, early childhood education, Spanish Heritage Language

1. Introduction

The Hispanic population comprises 18.3% in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2019); it is the largest minority group as of July 1, 2018. The steady increase of the Hispanic population has resulted in increased “diversity in classrooms throughout the U.S.” (Ramirez et al., 2018, p. 85). The traditional English

Learner (EL) who walks into the classroom with the ability to only speak in their native language is not the sole representation of the bilingual student populace in American schools. The bilingual community in schools also consists of heritage language speakers who enter the classroom speaking their heritage language in addition to English. Heritage Language (HL) refers to “a minority language spoken primarily at home that is often a major step toward achieving bilingualism” (Gollan et al., 2015, p. 147; refer to Table 1 for terms used in this review).

Ribot et al. (2018) found a pattern among HL speakers when conversing with their parents. According to Gutierrez-Cullen et al. (2009, as cited in Ribot et al., 2018), when spoken to in their HL, children tend to switch languages and reply in their dominant English language, a switch not seen when HL speakers are addressed in the dominant English language. This brings the question, why do SHL children frequently incline towards the more dominant English language and, consequently, reduce the use of their HL? As explained by Paez et al. (2007, as cited in Ramirez et al., 2019), “research has shown that the Spanish language development of Latino (DLL) children attending preschool programs in the US is decreasing at a rapid rate” (p. 86). In an attempt to understand this pattern, a thorough analysis was conducted targeting four key elements associated with SHL: (a) SHL students, (b) parents of SHL students (c) educators of SHL students, and (d) the instructional strategies and programs provided to these learners. This review is also designed to bring awareness to the lack of modern research aimed at understanding SHL elementary-age students and their commonality of losing their cultural identity when choosing the dominant English language from their mother tongue. In an effort to provide a clear understanding of this review, terms and definitions are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Key Terms Related to Spanish Heritage Language

Terms	Definitions	References
additive bilingual programs	“Bilingual programs are intended to add English to the repertoire of the speaker, not replace the first language with English” (p. 169).	Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; as cited in Fuller & Hosemann, 2015
dual language	“Students are taught some content through one language and other subjects in an additional language, in addition to Language Arts in both languages with an explicit goal of developing their bilingualism and biliteracy” (p. 54).	Wiley & Garcia, 2016
heritage language	“A minority language spoken primarily at home. This is often seen as a major step toward achieving bilingualism” (p. 147).	Gollan et al., 2015
subtractive bilingual programs	“That is, they are programs that focus on the acquisition of English without the maintenance of the first language” (p. 169).	Fuller & Hosemann, 2015
transitional bilingual education	“A transitional bilingual education program (TBE), in which students who are acquiring English are taught some content	Wiley & Garcia, 2016

program (TBE) through their home language and other subjects in English, in addition to Language Arts, but only temporarily until students are deemed fluent in English” (p. 54).

2. Methodology

A literature review was conducted using the Texas A&M International University Killam Library to access and search databases such as WorldCat and JSTOR. The WorldCat database is described by Galvan and Galvan (2017) as “a virtual database consisting of the catalogues of about 72,000 libraries in 170 countries and territories that participate in the Online Computer Library Center global cooperative...” (p. 20) and identify the search results as more “comprehensive” (p. 20).

As seen in Table 2, the first three searches conducted in WorldCat included the terms, *Spanish Heritage Language*, *elementary classroom*, and *instruction*, and ranged from the years 2014 to 2019 October. The parameters used included *peer reviewed* and *English language*. These searches produced results too large to explore, a combined total of 186 articles. Judging by their titles, none of the articles concentrated solely on Spanish Heritage Language and elementary school-age children in the United States. The articles found with these searches included studies conducted with college students and other heritage languages such as Japanese, none of which correlated with the focus of this review. Then, an additional search was conducted in another database, JSTOR. Again, none of article titles related to the focus of this review.

Three additional searches were conducted. Search 5 included the terms *Spanish Heritage Language* and *early childhood education* with the use of Boolean operators such as AND along with NOT. As suggested by Galvan and Galvan (2017), the use of Boolean operators can reduce the number of references in a search and can eliminate unwanted results (p. 61). The Boolean operator *NOT* was strategically used to eliminate any articles focused on Japanese HL. The use of Boolean operators significantly reduced the number of articles per search. Search 6 included the keywords *dual language*, *Spanish Heritage Language*, and *elementary* which produced 26 search results with two that were relevant to this review. Search 7 included the phrase *from bilingual to monolingual*, *early childhood education*, and *Spanish Heritage Language*. The search produced 26 results with two applicable articles. With these searches, seven relevant articles were discovered.

As a result of the few articles found ranging from 2014 to October 2019, an eighth search was conducted ranging from the year 2005 to 2011, in an effort to find additional research regarding SHL and the four elements targeted in this review. The keywords used included, *bilingual early education*, *Spanish Heritage Language*, and *instruction*, using the same parameters as before. This search resulted in 33 articles in which four were relevant to the purpose of this review. The focus of the articles included, (a) the influence of the English language in a DL program, (b) the relationship between student and teacher oral language use, (c) a heritage language learners’ identity, and (d) parents of SHL students.

A total of 109 references were found. In order to reduce the number of articles, the process of excluding sources began. Articles focused on college students and heritage languages other than Spanish, were excluded. A total of 98 articles were disqualified by the attributes included in their title. All titles were analyzed to determine the relevance with this review. Additionally, the abstract of the articles with closely related titles were perused to confirm their correlation to this review. From 109 sources found, a total of eleven relevant articles were located. Each article was categorized by authors' focus as seen in Table 3.

From the articles found, two were published in 2019; the two articles focused on the role a teacher plays in DL instruction with a focus on promoting bilingualism and the influence of Spanish in bilingual children's social interactions. Despite the fact that these articles do not specifically target SHL instruction and the preservation of a student's mother-tongue, the articles contain information that will aid in understanding SHL students and best instructional practices in elementary schools.

Table 2. Audit Trail

Database	Dates Reviewed	Search Terms	Sources Located	Relevant Sources
WorldCat, Search 1	Jan 2014- Oct. 2019	"Spanish Heritage Language"	21	0
WorldCat, Search 2	Jan. 2014- Oct. 2019	"Spanish Heritage Language" AND "elementary classroom"	40	0
WorldCat, Search 3	Jan. 2014- Oct. 2019	"Spanish Heritage Language" AND "instruction" AND "elementary"	53	0
JSTOR, Search 4	Jan. 2014- Oct. 2019	"Spanish" AND "heritage language" AND "elementary"	72	0
WorldCat, Search 5	Jan. 2018- Oct. 2019	"Spanish Heritage Language" AND "early childhood education" NOT "Japanese"	23	2
WorldCat, Search 6	Jan. 2014- Oct. 2019	"dual-language" AND "Spanish Heritage Language" AND "elementary"	27	3
WorldCat, Search 7	Jan. 2014- Oct. 2019	"from bilingual to monolingual" AND "early childhood education" AND "Spanish Heritage Language"	26	2
WorldCat, Search 8	Jan. 2005- Dec. 2011	"bilingual early education" AND "Spanish Heritage Language" AND "instruction"	33	4

Table 3. Categorization of Articles Bunched up

Author(s) & Year of Study	Focus	Focus Questions
Students		
Arredondo & Gelman (2019)	Students with a SHL	Do bilingual children use Spanish varieties to make social judgments?
Palmer (2009)	SHL students and English-speaking students in a dual-language program	Do English speakers in a dual-language program influence the conversation dynamics in the classroom?
Ribot et al. (2018)	Children with SHL	What is the correlation between a child's English input and output with language preference?
Parents		
Farrugio (2010)	Parents of SHL speakers	How have bilingual programs influenced a parent's attitudes towards the preservation of their children's HL?
Teachers		
Ballinger & Lyster (2011)	Teachers of dual language students	Does a teacher's language use influence a student's language in a dual language classroom?
Ramirez et al. (2019)	Teachers in a bilingual classroom	What teacher characteristics influence a student's development of bilingualism?
Programs		
Fuller & Hosemann (2015)	Bilingual programs	What is the relationship between multilingualism and the school community?
Leeman et al. (2011)	Bilingual programs	Can community-based opportunities strengthen critical language awareness?
Wiley & Garcia (2016)	Bilingual programs	What is the connection between language policy & planning and language education?

3. Analysis

The eleven articles analyzed for this review were organized into one of four categories: articles focused on (a) SHL students as seen in Table 4, (b) the role and views of parents of SHL students, and (c) the roles and views of teachers of SHL students as seen in Table 5, and (d) the bilingual programs offered to SHL students as seen in Table 6. In this literature review, each element was considered in order to understand how each of these four components influences SHL learners' preference for the English language.

3.1 SHL Students

It is important to begin the analysis by focusing on the views of SLH students and understand their common preference of English over their SHL. As the focus is understanding why SHL learners

consistently revert towards the English language and decreasing the use of their HL, it is important to understand these students' perspectives when discussing their two languages. The research regarding SHL students' perspectives regarding their language was limited. In the research conducted, 3 studies were found that could be used to understand SHL learners' inclination to the English language. The methodology which the findings of the three most relevant articles found is seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Findings of Spanish Heritage Language Student Perspectives

Author, Publication Year, & Participants	Detailed Methodology	Findings
Arredondo & Gelman (2019)		
The study included bilingual children of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent.	The article consists of four separate studies in the form of a questionnaire, to understand the correlation between Spanish varieties and bilingual children's social judgments.	"Early in development, U.S. Spanish-English bilingual children begin to distinguish dialects in their heritage language Spanish (e.g., Mexican vs. Puerto Rican Spanish). However, not until 10 years of age do children begin using such dialects to make social judgments about others" (p. 669).
1st Study Participants: 4-6 year old, 7-9 year old, 10-12 year old, 13-17 year old SHL bilinguals.	1st Study: The correlation between third person friendship inferences and dialect in their HL.	1st Study: 13-17 year old bilinguals made friendship selections based on dialect more than any other age group.
2nd Study Participants: 4-6 year old SHL bilinguals.	2nd Study: The correlation between third person friendship inferences and two different languages.	2nd Study: 4-6 year old students made friendship selections based on their dominant language.
3rd Study Participants: 4-6 year old English monolinguals.	3rd Study: The correlation between third person friendships and dialect based on English monolinguals.	3rd Study: English monolinguals did not discriminate based on dialect.
4th Study Participants: 7-9 year old and 10-12 year old SHL students who are exposed to Spanish even outside the home.	4th Study: The correlation between third person friendships and different Spanish dialects based on SHL bilinguals who are exposed to the Spanish language in the home as well as outside the home.	4th Study: There were no significant judgments made based on different Spanish dialects. Weaknesses: "The present work is limited by the inclusion of participants from a variety of Spanish ethnic backgrounds whose sensitivity to dialect distinctions may vary depending on which dialects they have experienced, as well as their knowledge of associated social, cultural, and ethnic differences" (p. 668).

Palmer (2009)

Participants: A second-grade two-way immersion class of 20 students. Eight of the students' first language was English and 12 were SHL speakers.	An individual researcher conducted a qualitative study to understand the conversational power dynamics in a two-way program. In one individual school, the researcher conducted observations, interviews, and recordings. An evaluation of current research regarding the dominance of the English language in elementary schools was provided.	“English students in this two-way DL program played a role in encouraging the use of the English language, even during Spanish instruction” (p. 198). Students whose first language is English influence the amount of English used in a DL school setting. Weaknesses: The author did not report the use of outside experts for peer review.
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Ribot et al. (2018)

Participants: 47 bilingual children ranging in age from 30-42 months.	The qualitative study included detailed information from their parents and two sessions measuring the children's language skills in relation to language input and output. Language input and output were defined.	The use of language output contributes to the development of expressive language (p. 935). “The pattern of selective use of one language in speaking, which is characteristic of many bilingual children, could be the source of a gap between receptive and expressive skills in the less-used language, which is also characteristic of many bilingual children” (Gibson et al., 2012, as cited in Ribot et al., 2018, pp. 936-937). Weaknesses: “There are limitations in the current evidence, however, that arise from limitations in the measures of language use and language skills” (p. 937).
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3.2 SHL Parents

To gain a good understanding of SHL, the attempt to understand the perspective of SHL parents was made. Similar to research focused on SHL learners in elementary schools, it was difficult to find current research focused on the views of SHL parents. Farrugio (2010) conducted a qualitative analysis of parents of SHL students along with their views of bilingualism and their preservation of their children's culture. The study was conducted while Proposition 227, which became a state law in June 1998, in California, was still in effect. The law mandated “English-only (EO) approaches as the preferred language teaching method for English language learners (ELLs) and required parents to sign written waivers in order to place their students into bilingual classes” (Farrugio, 2010, p. 3).

The participating parents were placed in one of three categories; parents who chose to place their children in English only (EO) classes, parents who placed their children in bilingual education (BE) classes, and parents who wanted their children in a bilingual program but were denied (WBE) due to lack of space. The findings suggested “BE parents were satisfied with the bilingual program and felt the program preserved their culture and language” (Farrugio, 2010, p. 13). WBE parents, who had at some point experienced a bilingual program, were resentful because their children did not have the

opportunity to participate in the bilingual programs provided. WBE parents acknowledge the preservation of culture and language that bilingual programs provide. Lastly, EO parents felt the only place to preserve their culture and language was at home. Farrugio explained, “Those [parents] who have seen the heritage potential of additive programs were resentful toward the assimilationist pressure of the EO classes” (p. 18).

Although the study provides insight on parent views regarding their children’s HL and the preservation of their culture, the study was conducted almost 20 years ago and does not foster a current representation of SHL parents’ views. This calls for the urgent need of future research centralized in the perspective of parents of SHL learners and their role in the preservation of their children’s HL and culture.

3.3 SHL Teachers

In an effort to understand SHL students’ classroom environment, it was fundamental to also understand the role of SHL educators and their influence in their students’ language of choice. As explained later on, a teacher’s role and influence in the classroom is directly related to the bilingual program provided to SHL learners. An analysis of two studies focused on the teachers’ role in a DL immersion program is seen in Table 5. The findings of these two studies give a better understanding of a teacher’s influence in SHL students’ language preference.

Table 5. Findings on the Perspective of Teachers of SHL Students

Author, Publication Year, & Participants	Detailed Methodology	Findings
Ballinger & Lyster (2011) Participants: Students from a 1 st grade, 2 nd grade, and 3 rd grade classrooms. All classrooms provided a two-way 50/50 DL model.	The qualitative study consisted of classroom observations, student questionnaires, teacher interviews, and student focus group interviews.	In all three classrooms, the English language seemed to dominate student-to-student interaction with the exception of students who recently arrived in the United States. DL teachers were a direct influence on the amount of English and Spanish used in the classroom.
Ramirez et al. (2019) Participants: DL teachers and 217 dual language learners from Head Start to Kindergarten.	The longitudinal and cross-sectional study which included three different vocabulary assessments; Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in English and in Spanish and the Woodcock Johnson-III/Bateria III in both English and Spanish. “The purpose of the study is to analyze educators’ cultural competency, training of dual language learner (DLL) instruction, and the amount of DLL instruction experience they hold” (p. 87).	The amount of DLL training a teacher receives in addition to their cultural awareness was more beneficial to a students’ success than the number of years teaching. Teachers who are more culturally aware encourage and promote the use of a student’s HL.

3.4 Bilingual Education Programs

After reviewing research focused on student, parent, and teacher perspectives on SHL, it is necessary to also understand the different bilingual programs provided for SHL students. Studies focused on bilingual programs available for SHL students are described in Table 6. Three studies were analyzed in order to determine what bilingual education programs are ideal for the preservation of a student's culture and heritage language.

Table 6. Findings on the Different Bilingual Programs Provided to SHL Learners

Author, Publication Year, & Participants	Detailed Methodology	Findings
Fuller & Hosemann (2015)	<p>Method: Literature review of “Latino education from sociolinguistic and anthropological perspectives” (p. 168).</p> <p>Key Terms:</p> <p><i>Additive:</i> “bilingual programs that are intended to add English to the repertoire of the speaker, not to replace the first language with English” (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; as cited in Fuller & Hosemann, 2015, p. 169).</p> <p><i>Subtractive:</i> “programs focused on the acquisition of English without the maintenance of the first language” (p. 169).</p>	<p>Bilingual classrooms that promote bilingualism and self-expression tend to be more academically successful.</p> <p>Most bilingual programs focus on English proficiency.</p> <p>“The efforts of the teacher to emphasize that status and importance of Spanish, through explicit discussion and the incorporation of the language into all of the classroom activities, resulted in the students using more Spanish and being proud of their bilingualism” (pp. 174-175).</p>
Leeman et al. (2011)	<p>Methods: Action research based on a critical service-learning program. College students of SHL were given the opportunity to work with SHL elementary students in an effort to strengthen their identity and social activism.</p>	<p>“Positive feelings about their heritage language and culture can contribute not only to language maintenance, but also to academic success and narrowing of the “Latino achievement gap” (Carreira, 2007, as cited in Leeman et al., 2011, p. 484).</p> <p>Weakness: The author did not provide a detailed explanation of the participants of the study.</p>
Wiley & Garcia (2016)	<p>Method: A peer review analyzing language policies in language education and the two bilingual programs provided in the U.S. An explanation was given on the history of bilingual education in the U.S. Transitional bilingual education programs were defined as programs designed for students to acquire the English language with some HL support (p. 54). DL bilingual education programs are defined as programs designed for students to develop bilingualism and biliteracy (p. 54).</p>	<p>Although the number of dual-language programs is increasing, “the growth has been slow, and they often have little support” (p. 55).</p> <p>“A strong language education policy in the United States that would support bilingualism as a resource must start by acknowledging the language practices of U.S. bilingual communities, and not simply rely on the constructed understandings of national languages that have informed much language education policy in the past” (p. 60).</p>

4. Findings

4.1 Spanish Heritage Language Student Perspectives

Arredondo and Gelman (2019) have documented that bilingual children are able to differentiate between their two languages and are able to use them adequately when speaking to monolinguals (p. 655). In a school setting, SHL students are surrounded by bilingual and monolingual individuals. As explained in the findings in Table 4, English monolinguals play a key role in promoting the use of the English language, even in a dual language immersion program. As the findings in Ribot et al. (2018) suggest, children are more predisposed to have one dominant language, such as English, when exposed to that language more than the other. Considering the amount of exposure students experience with the English language compared to Spanish, especially in transitional bilingual programs, it is evident why SHL students gradually begin to lose interest in their HL. Arredondo and Gelman (2019) determined that students between the age of four and six years old make friendship selections based on their dominant language. If an SHL learner's dominant language is English, the student is prone to create friendships with English speakers which results in the regular input and output of English and reduces the amount of exposure and use of their SHL.

4.2 The Perspective of Parents of SHL Children

A child's preservation of their native language and culture is a goal many parents strive to achieve. Farrugio (2010) determined parents of bilingual students in a bilingual education program were satisfied with the preservation of their child's HL and the promotion of their culture. It was those parents who did not have the bilingual education experience that felt the need to surrender the hope for their children to continue to develop their native language simultaneously to the English language, and decided to preserve their language and culture at home. As a result, those students were exposed to English throughout most of their day in school and were only exposed to Spanish for a limited amount of time at home. As previously stated, children exposed to English more than their SHL can ultimately result in a child's inclination to the English language while losing their HL. It is important to note, the study conducted by Farrugio was developed from 2000 to 2002. In the last 19 years, the amount of transitional bilingual and dual-language programs available in the United States has increased. It is important to bring awareness to the lack of up-to-date research regarding the views of parents of SHL students. The relationship between educators and parents is crucial in order to achieve student success; the lack of studies focused on the perspectives of SHL parents hinders the progression of SHL research.

4.3 The Perspective of Teachers of SHL Students

Ramirez et al. (2019) examined the correlation between the amount of DL instruction training received by teachers and the success of DL students as seen in Table 6. The findings suggest a teacher's cultural awareness is directly linked to the amount of DL training they receive. Lee and Oxelson (2006, as cited in Ramirez et al., 2019) "found that highly trained teachers report encouraging literacy in the child's home language which in turn enhances children's cognitive and linguistic development" (p. 85). Ballinger and Lyster (2011) also identified the influence teachers have in the language used by SHL

learners. The teachers observed in the study were seen using the English language in order to meet the needs of students whose native language was English and to maintain good classroom management (p. 295). Reflecting on previous research, once again the English language tends to dominate the Spanish language due to the amount of English language exposure students receive.

4.4 Different Bilingual Programs Provided to SHL Learners

Similar to the other factors discussed, it was difficult to find current research focused on the different bilingual programs designed for SHL learners. As explained by Fuller and Hosemann (2015), all bilingual programs offered in the United States fall under two categories, additive and subtractive (p. 169). As formerly mentioned, SHL students are inclined to the dominant English language when they are more frequently exposed to it as opposed to their HL. “Contrastively, ‘additive’ (or strong) bilingual programs are intended to add English to the repertoire of the speaker, not replace the first language with English” (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; as cited in Fuller & Hosemann, 2015, p. 169).

While the two-way DL immersion program is the ideal additive program for SHL students, according to Wiley and Garcia (2016), “Dual language bilingual programs in the United States have grown, but they certainly have not reached their potential to educate bilingually either language or language minoritized children” (p. 55). SHL students in DL programs continue to be overexposed to the English language. In order to increase the amount of exposure and use of students’ SHL and decrease the probability of SHL students losing their mother tongue, new research must be conducted in order to demonstrate the necessity of authentic DL programs that promote bilingualism and biliteracy.

5. Conclusion

The systematic analysis of peer-reviewed research identifies one common variable: SHL students who are overly exposed to the English language tend to choose English over their HL. This, in return, can lead to the students’ loss of their SHL. In an effort to promote consistent exposure of both languages, new research must be conducted. From the articles found, only 11 articles provided information related to Spanish Heritage Language speakers and their inclination towards the English language. From the eleven articles reviewed, seven were published in the last five years and four were published between 2009 and 2011. As the SHL population in schools continues to grow, it is urgent to develop new research focused on the preservation of SHL and culture while simultaneously helping these students acquire the English language successfully.

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